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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the collective views of American and Canadian educators who discussed educational differences and similarities between the two countries at a cross-cultural conference. In October 1994, 26 members of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) met in Calgary with 150 educators from across Alberta (Canada). Participants agreed upon the similarity of educational reforms under way in Canada, the United States, and abroad--particularly, the trends toward downsizing; simultaneous centralization and local decision making; growing tensions among government, business, school, and university communities; an increased emphasis on accountability; a devaluation of education as a societal investment; and a rapid pace of change that precludes widespread involvement in decision-making. Other similarities included the influence of business, the move toward a market model, changes in classroom practice, and cuts in university budgets and increases in college tuition fees. It was noted, however, that Canada had different teacher-certification and administrator-selection practices, less student diversity, less public controversy about educational change, and a high level of teacher professionalism. Both American and Canadian educators agreed on the importance of attempting to act as a positive and reasoned influence on educational practice. (LMI)

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Discussions of Educational Change in Canada and the United States

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Talk of massive educational change dominated the discussions when 26 members of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) executive council and headquarters staff met in late October, 1994, with Canadian educators from across Alberta. The ASCD personnel were in Calgary, Alberta, for their fall meetings, and were hosted by the Alberta Affiliate of ASCD. The visitors met with nearly 150 representatives from a wide variety of groups associated with education in Alberta and visited schools in the Calgary area. The Americans met and spoke at length with teachers, administrators, professors, department of education officials, school board members, parents, and business leaders, during meetings co-sponsored by the Alberta Affiliate of ASCD and by the Centre for Leadership in Learning at The University of Calgary.

The majority of the conversations between the ASCD visitors and the Canadian educators was summarized in a written format by members of Alberta ASCD and by graduate students from the Faculty of Education at The University of Calgary. The summary notes showed that the talks focused on three areas: educational differences and similarities between the United States and Canada, what Albertans highlighted about their own system of education, and what the future might be for education. This report details the first area - educational differences and similarities between the two countries. Care was taken to reflect as accurately as possible both the content and the tone of the discussions. It is important to note that this summary expresses the collective views of meeting participants. Specific individuals who participated in the meetings may disagree with some or even many of the opinions contained in this report.

Large-Scale Change

If there was one thing that participants in the October meetings agreed upon it was the similarity of the educational reforms under way in Canada, the United States, and abroad. It was noted that Canadian education has always been influenced by trends in American education, perhaps because of the proximity of the two countries plus the dominance of a relatively large population over a much smaller one. However, North American education now mirrors many of the educational changes wrought by Sir Roger Douglas and his political colleagues in New Zealand, in addition to those completed by the former Thatcher government in Britain. One illustration of the international trends that were discussed was the growing tension among government, business, school, and university communities. Other examples were the concurrent and sometimes dichotomous moves toward local decision making and centralization of control, plus an increased emphasis on accountability, a devaluing of education as a societal investment, and a rapid pace of change that precludes widespread involvement in decisions.

The Alberta educators who participated in the meetings highlighted several recent experiences with which their American visitors could identify. In particular, efforts to rationalize educational services were viewed as part of a wide-ranging pattern with the potential to affect students, teachers, and programs significantly. Some initiatives, like the amalgamation of Alberta school boards, were perceived positively as government's efforts to seek efficiency in the delivery of educational programs. Amalgamation had resulted in the number of school boards being reduced to 57 from 141 and the number of school board members to go from over 1000 to just over 400. Other moves, such as the loss of employment for teachers with low seniority and the cancellation of English as a Second Language programs in urban centres,

were decried. Still other changes, like the Alberta government's decision to take control of all school taxes and to redistribute funds among school districts in the province, had supporters and detractors depending upon who won and lost resources. The Albertans noted that downsizing and centralization were not restricted to education but also had occurred in other public arenas like health and social services.

Reasons for Change in Alberta

ASCD visitors discovered that, even though Alberta is one of Canada's wealthiest provinces, the current Conservative government was elected because of its promises to reduce government spending. As a result, the provincial government made unprecedented funding cuts in all sectors. At least $239 million were taken from the provincial education budget alone over a three year period. The cuts included a five percent salary reduction for virtually all public sector workers, including school teachers and university professors. To cope with lower budgets, school boards authorized more user fees for services like busing and kindergarten programs, while universities increased tuition fees and implemented staff reduction initiatives. Despite the cuts and user fees, public support for the provincial government consistently maintained a high level. In fact, other governments from across Canada expressed interest in following Alberta's example.

Although deficit reduction was the purported reason for large-scale educational change in Alberta, the government clearly had philosophical and political motivations as well. In the opinion of some Albertans, educational reforms portrayed the government's high regard for privatization, the shifting of control from school boards to both the provincial government and parent council levels, and standardized achievement tests. These values were supported by a mandate from the public to

initiate change, according to the representatives from the provincial department of education who met with the ASCD visitors.

The perceived mandate to change education led the government to announce in February, 1993, a three-year business plan for education. Besides declaring government intentions to reduce the number of school boards, increase accountability, and encourage school choice, the business plan also promised to increase efficiency and effectiveness, ensure equitable funding of school boards, reduce bureaucracy within the department of education, and improve services for students with special needs. As well, the plan promised to improve teaching generally via updated teacher education courses and in-service programs.

Consultation

Perceptions of the appropriateness of the government's actions varied according to the roles of educational stakeholders. Some participants in the meetings with ASCD members stated their views that the changes were right-wing interventions intended to restrict teacher professionalism. Others proclaimed, "These changes are ideas whose time has come," or "These are right things to do and good for kids." Whatever people's opinions of educational change in Alberta, there was a belief widely held among those at the meetings that the changes were top-down in nature and not the result of a truly consultative process. A smaller proportion of those in attendance felt that the government had consulted but with people outside the "educational establishment."

Those who believed that consultation had taken place referred to a series of round-table discussions, held at various locations throughout the province, that preceded the government's business plan for education. People participated in the

discussions only at the invitation of the minister of education, which fostered the impression that the minister only wanted to hear from individuals with a particular belief structure. This perception resulted in the organization of separate round-table discussions by, among others, the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Calgary Catholic Board of Education. However, it is uncertain how much weight the minister of education gave to the recommendations that came from the parallel round-table talks relative to the ones that originated in the minister-sponsored ones.

The American guests learned from their hosts that the business sector in Alberta had a large impact on government educational policies. Some of the pressure came from Chambers of Commerce while some originated with groups like the Conference Board of Canada, a national organization comprised of many of Canada's largest and most influential corporations. Some Canadians from outside the business sector suggested that poor economic conditions in Canada and the United States led business people to look to education to make the North American economy more competitive with their international competitors. Accurate or not, the belief that education influences the Canadian economy fostered the fear among parents that their children may not be able to compete successfully for jobs and, in fact, may have a lifestyle lower in quality than what their parents have enjoyed.

It is important to note that, despite the accusation that business wielded a disproportionate influence in government policy making, the Conference Board of Canada and many educators were not far apart in their views of the optimal education for children. For example, the Conference Board of Canada (1992) recently published a profile of the critical skills required of the Canadian work force. That profile of the ideal Canadian worker included the abilities to communicate, think, and learn at high levels. As well, the model employee would come to the workplace with positive attitudes and behaviors, a strong sense of responsibility and adaptability, and the

ability to work well with others. For the past several years, the Conference Board of Canada has presented its views on education to stakeholder groups, including the Toronto-based Council of Ministers of Education, which counts Alberta's minister of education among its members. The discussion of the business impact on education prompted several of the American ASCD members to urge their Canadian colleagues to build on areas of commonality and to work proactively with business leaders.

Whatever the degree of public consultation, the "ink is dry" on the business plan for education in Alberta, according to a representative from the provincial department of education. This claim, along with the impressions gathered during school visits and meetings with various Albertans, caused at least some of the visiting American educators to observe that teacher input was not reflected in the change process they heard described to them. The Americans stated that, along with a host of positive characteristics seen in the Alberta schools they had visited, they also met teachers concerned about low morale in schools, larger classes, salary reductions, and insufficient support for students with special needs. Further, the American educators commented on the lack of consensus around school reforms in Alberta that was apparent in the court challenges by school board associations to recent government policies.

Toward a Market Model

Despite significant cultural differences in some domains, the Canadian and American educators found they spoke a similar language when it came to terms like privatization, charter schools, private schooling, open enrolment, vouchers, and public school choice. For example, the Americans from states such as Massachusetts shared how they responded to parent demands for school choice by instituting policies

allowing open enrolment at the elementary level. They found that the Calgary Public School District, the largest public school system in Canada, had long allowed open enrolment but without supplying bus transportation to students, which is available in the smaller Acton-Boxborough school district in Massachusetts. Also, the Americans learned that their Canadian colleagues also were seeing the contracting of support services in schools to private businesses but not the contracting of instructional services in public schools to nonunion teachers, which has been done in parts of the United States. One American observed that contracted instructional services were more flexible than traditional staffing, but at least a few Canadian educators wondered about the impact of such staffing strategies on the quality of education. In general, meeting participants from both sides of the border agreed that schools in their countries are being reshaped by government policies intended to foster increased parental involvement, more competition for students among schools, and additional opportunities for parents and students to opt out of the "state" system of education.

Some of the American teachers and administrators visiting Canada were surprised to learn that private schools in Alberta can qualify for government funding, albeit it less than the funding granted to public and Catholic schools. The Canadians responded by noting that, with the initiation of optional charter schools and mandated parent councils within public and Catholic school districts in the province, public and private schools might be even less distinguishable in the future. This belief was shared by an educator from Boston where sixteen charter schools are planned for September, 1995.

Stories of positive adaptations to political pressures from the United States were reported by the Americans. For example, the Piedmont Triad Horizons consortium, formed to guide a collaboratively planned school change program in North Carolina includes representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, a state

senator, a congressman, a school district superintendent, and university deans. Also, a representative from Arkansas reported that pressures to save money resulted in personnel from the fields of health, social, and educational services coming together to eliminate duplication and coordinate their programs.

However, even those who experienced some benefits from a more competitive school system noted that inequities in the quality of schooling available to students in higher versus lower income communities were intensified. In addition, some present at the meetings bristled at the possibility of charter schools becoming de facto private schools at public rather than private expense. Even the fact that schools with reduced access to public funds might seek business partnerships or corporate sponsors raised concerns beyond those of equitable resource allocation. That is, society can lose control over curricula when schools are dependent upon private sponsors who will fund only programs that meet with their approval. Finally, it was noted that heightened competition among schools can produce results that are directly opposite from those sought by its proponents. That is, competition for students actually may reduce the possibility that excellent programs and teaching strategies are shared among schools if that sharing means the schools that receive information might more easily entice students from their competitors. Consequently, a market model could reduce the dissemination of strong educational programs and, instead, merely increase divisiveness among communities and schools.

Revising Daily Practice

The Canadian and American educators involved in the October meetings came to the conclusion that current influences on classroom practice were quite consistent across North America. For instance, public calls to keep students and teachers

accountable resulted in standardized tests determining instructional content and methodologies on both sides of the Canada-United States border. The Americans reported that most states have high school exit examinations. Alberta also has grade twelve exit examinations and, in addition, all students in grades three, six, and nine write provincial tests in the four core subject areas of mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies. Unfortunately, expanded standardized testing of the core subjects in both North American contexts has led to a reduced emphasis upon alternative assessment strategies, such as performance and authentic assessments. As well, the focus upon the core subject areas has been accompanied by a reduction in the status of optional courses, including the fine arts. This was attributed to the fact that assessment of student performance in the optional courses is not done because it is seen as more difficult and costly than in the core subjects.

There was other evidence of education and the resources it consumes coming under close public scrutiny. As of September, 1994, the Alberta government reduced by half the funding for kindergarten programs. To cope, some school boards reduced kindergarten from 400 hours to a 200-hour program. Other school boards kept the 400-hour program but charged tuition of about $450 per child. The provincial government initially presented the reductions in kindergarten as a cost-cutting decision, but a department of education official told the international representatives from ASCD that 200 hours "were adequate, whether it is believed or not." Along with a reduced kindergarten program came the suggestion that high school students attending school after the age of 19 would lose their right to a free education and would be required to pay tuition fees on a per-course basis.

Site-based management arose as a concept that is being promoted in Canada and the United States as a mechanism for renewing the focus of schools. The implementation of site-based management was described as a difficult, long process

that may or may not improve student achievement. As well, site-based management was accused of fostering community fragmentation and unhealthy competition among schools when it was implemented in the United States. Nevertheless, educators from the city of Edmonton, Alberta, claimed that site-based management in the public school system there has ensured that schools have remained answerable to their communities. In fact, one Alberta administrator stated that site-based management has as much potential as any other governance structure when the decision to use it was made collaboratively by all stakeholders in education. However, that claim was countered by another Albertan who said that, although lip service is given to site-based management, centralization of power over the really important decisions has been usurped by the Alberta government and that school communities are left with decision-making authority in areas of relatively minor importance.

One American expressed the view that site-based management required new behaviors on the part of school principals. He said that autocratic principals must learn to become more collaborative, a difficult skill to put into practice. Moreover, participatory decision making takes time that is often unavailable or difficult to work into the school timetable. Nevertheless, Canadians were told that strong, flexible school leaders can use site-based management as a tool to improve staff morale, assist in change initiatives, improve communication and build a strong sense of kinship with school communities.

Teacher Education and Certification

University programs in Alberta and America are under similar financial pressures. A 21% budget reduction over three years was imposed recently on all universities in Alberta. The provincial government mandated the reduced funding as

part of an overall reduction in government expenditures. The cutback resulted in program and staff cuts, although the government respected the tradition of university self-governance and, to date, has avoided interfering with decisions about which programs and faculties should be affected. However, the government stated publicly that universities must increase the numbers of students enrolled in programs and, as an incentive, offered a total of $40 million to fund innovative university programs that would serve larger numbers of students.

University budget cuts have been accompanied by tuition fee increases on both sides of the Canada-United States border. Tuition fees at Canadian universities are fairly consistent, hovering around $2500 per year for most undergraduate programs. There is a greater range of tuition fees at American universities, with costs of up to $25000 for some programs at private universities. Clearly, rising tuition fees have the potential to reshape the tendency of North American citizens to encourage their children to attain a post-secondary education.

Despite the fact that Canadian and American universities face similar financial pressures, there were apparent differences in their teacher education programs. Some of the ASCD representatives to the Calgary meetings described what they thought was a stronger emphasis on subject knowledge than on pedagogy in American schools of education. Many programs there require students to have an arts or science degree prior to their admittance to a one year teacher education program, in effect making teacher education at least a five year program.

The Canadian hosts shared their perception that teacher preparation should involve more than just a content background. Teacher education programs, portions of which are offered at both universities and community colleges, allow Canadian students to choose from several routes to certification as a teacher. Students at the University of Calgary, for instance, can select a four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.)

program, a B.Ed. after-degree program which requires an undergraduate degree for entry to two years of study within the faculty of education, and a five-year joint degree program which graduates students with a B.Ed. plus another undergraduate degree such as a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Fine Arts, or a Bachelor of Physical Education. Interestingly, demand for admission to the faculty of education at the University of Calgary over the past several years has far exceeded the 1200 spaces available, causing the academic requirements for entry to the teacher education program to be among the most rigorous of all undergraduate programs on the university campus.

Differences between American and Alberta certification processes were highlighted during the ASCD members' time in Alberta. They noted that, unlike new teachers in America , new teachers in Alberta gain a permanent teaching certificate after two successful years in the classroom and a continuing contract after just one year of effective teaching with a specific school board. As well, at least one American visitor to Alberta was surprised to discover that educational administrators in that province do not have to be specially certified to be appointed to their positions. However, this person was told that a de facto certification process already exists in urban centres in Alberta, whereby registration in a master's degree program is virtually mandatory for appointment to a junior administrative position. Further, new appointments to the principalship are almost always contingent, at least informally, upon the holding of a master's degree in education, although some mid- and late-career principals were appointed when master's degrees were desirable but not necessary. It should be noted that most rural principals in the province have completed some graduate courses, but some are still being appointed without holding master's degrees. Nearly all school superintendents hold master's degree, with the exception of late-career superintendents who were hired when graduate work was

less common. Even though it is not unusual for principals and superintendents in Alberta to hold doctoral degrees, this phenomenon is not nearly as widespread as it is throughout the United States where many principals and most superintendents have doctorates.

Other Impressions of Alberta

Members of ASCD executive council and headquarters staff made several observations about their visits to school in the Calgary region. The ASCD representatives commented on how their observations in Alberta's schools helped sharpen their understandings of American schools.

In contrast to schools in the United States, schools in Alberta seemed to be less diverse. There was variance in socioeconomic terms among schools in and near Calgary but less than that seen in large American cities. Most students were white even though there was a small number of school communities in which many races were represented. Where student diversity did exist, such as in language groups, instruction reflected good recognition of different student needs. Visitors noticed that diversity in student ability was dealt with through a process of inclusion that included some support for classroom teachers. As one American stated, "Canada integrates regular teachers into special education [while] the U.S. integrates special education kids into regular programs."

Notwithstanding the relative lack of diversity in schools and a province-wide curriculum mandated by the Alberta government, ASCD representatives noted differences that would make it erroneous to conclude that Canadian schools were indistinguishable from one another. Efforts to utilize alternative assessment strategies and creative course scheduling were observed in one senior high school. Religion

was taught in one public elementary school and parents influenced the decision to utilize technology across the curriculum in another senior high school. The use of a wide variety of modes of instruction was more easily discerned in some schools than others. An alternative senior high school for students who had failed to thrive in a regular high school setting was seen to have high performing students. Teachers in one school were consciously focusing on developing students' conflict resolution skills. A junior high school that was visited was in the midst of piloting an independent study program for students in grades eight and nine who worked well autonomously. Finally, a strong level of teacher and administrator flexibility was described by the Americans as a possible catalyst for the innovation noticed in the schools visited.

ASCD visitors thought that Alberta school personnel got along with their communities better than their American counterparts. There was less competition and more cooperation among school districts and students. In fact, private schools even received inservice support from their colleagues in public and Catholic schools. The Americans felt that, despite the reforms occurring in Alberta's schools, there was less public controversy over educational change than in the United States, which permitted Albertans a more genuine focus on teaching and learning processes, life skills, values, and problem solving. As one American put it, the visit to Canadian schools gave "a sense of how peevish and ill-tempered the American public is!"

The high level of professionalism among Alberta teachers was commented on several times by the Americans. Related observations included the fact that teachers in Alberta received no extra wages for coaching or other extracurricular duties but still did "a lot more outside school than in the U.S." This volunteerism was attributed to a highly altruistic teaching force. The Canadians suggested that, in general, teachers with four year degrees were paid more (about $51000 for a teacher with a 4 year degree and 11 years of experience, and approximately $55000 per year for teachers

with 6 years of university education and 11 years of experience) than their American colleagues, but in recent years many American teacher salaries have risen to that level and beyond. Salaries of public and Catholic school teachers in Alberta are very similar, with teachers in private schools paid considerably less.

Another factor thought to possibly affect teacher professionalism positively was the fact that teachers and administrators in Alberta belonged to the same professional association or union. However, the present provincial government appeared to be receptive to efforts to force teachers and administrators into separate professional organizations and the future of the teachers' association was somewhat uncertain at the time of the meetings in Calgary.

The ethos of the Alberta schools elicited many favorable remarks. ASCD personnel described student-teacher relations in the schools they visited as warm and respectful. In fact, they thought that there was an observable focus on positive relationships in all the schools they visited. Moreover, staff members were portrayed as gracious and students as on task. Those visitors who spent time in a quite new senior high school, in which instruction in most courses was centered around the extensive use of technology, gave enthusiastic reports of high school students thriving in a very flexible learning environment. Additionally, the guests thought that the structural design of the new high school supported the values and aesthetics of the instructional program. Finally, the contingent of educators representing ASCD stated that Alberta's schools should be given credit for significant accomplishments.

Looking Ahead

The gathering in Calgary afforded ASCD representatives and Canadian educators the opportunity to share perspectives and understandings. It reflected the desire of participants to support one another as they, in the words of one participant, "build the school as the center of the community." Unfortunately, the very characteristics of Alberta's education system that were admired by the Americans are the things being threatened by government actions. The visitors told the Albertans that they "felt your pain when you talked about early childhood services, budget cuts, and the increasing role of politics in education."

The guests encouraged Albertans to promote the importance of using "sound research to inform practice" rather than allowing, for example, the media to shape education. However, everyone recognized that there were no easy answers to the difficulties facing students and educators in Alberta and the United States. In fact, one factor exacerbating the current challenges in education is that so many people have their own, sometimes conflicting, answers. Moreover, what is appropriate for education is always unique as to time, place, and culture, making many models of education nontransferable. Nevertheless, better understandings of what is possible and productive in educational reform can result from collaborating with colleagues from different settings. All participants agreed on the importance of at least attempting to be a positive and reasoned influence on educational practice during a tumultuous era in the history of education. That influence can be major, such as lobbying national and local governments, or it can impact a smaller number of people, like the interest group representatives who took part in the the cross-cultural exchange of ideas in Calgary.